

HUNTERS' VIEWS ABOUT WATERFOWL SEASON DATES

After each of the 1996-2005 seasons, we asked hunters to indicate the week they most preferred to hunt ducks in the county they hunted most. The predominant theme after mild seasons during 1997-1999 was for a later duck season structure. After an early freeze-up in 2000, hunters indicated earlier season preferences. More recently, hunter preferences have resumed the trend towards later dates, and now the average preferred week to hunt is nearly two weeks later than in 1996.

All hunter preferences are legitimate; however, varied attitudes about the “best” season are not necessarily shared by all hunters even in a local area. Species preferences (mallards vs. other dabblers), habitat types (shallow, managed sites vs. reservoirs and rivers), and weather conditions (mild vs. severe) are just some of the factors that contribute to differences in views about preferred season timing. As a result, waterfowl season dates always are points of contention.

Figure 15. Statewide week preferred to hunt ducks, 1996-

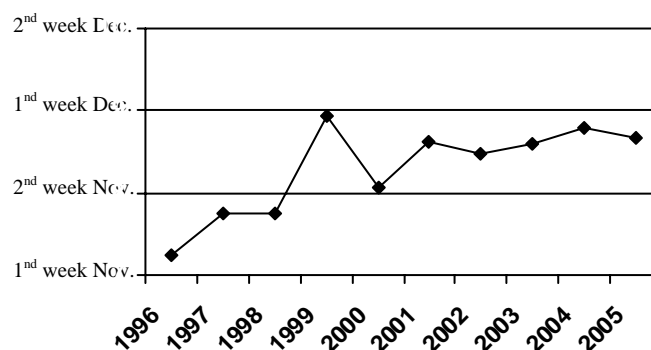


Figure 16. North Zone – Week preferred to hunt ducks, 2001-2004 average & 2005.

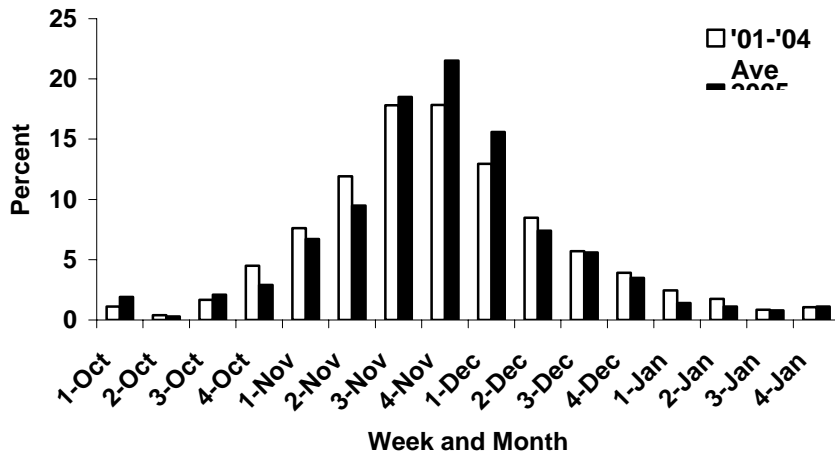


Figure 17. Middle Zone – Week preferred to hunt ducks, 2001-2004 average & 2005.

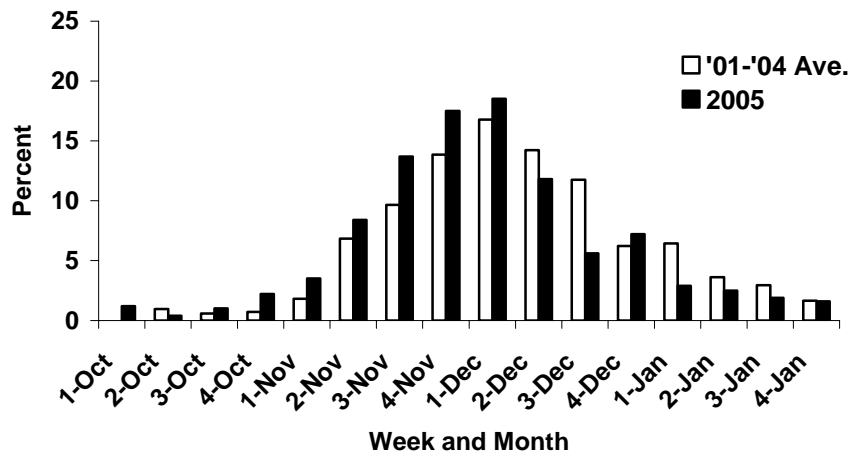
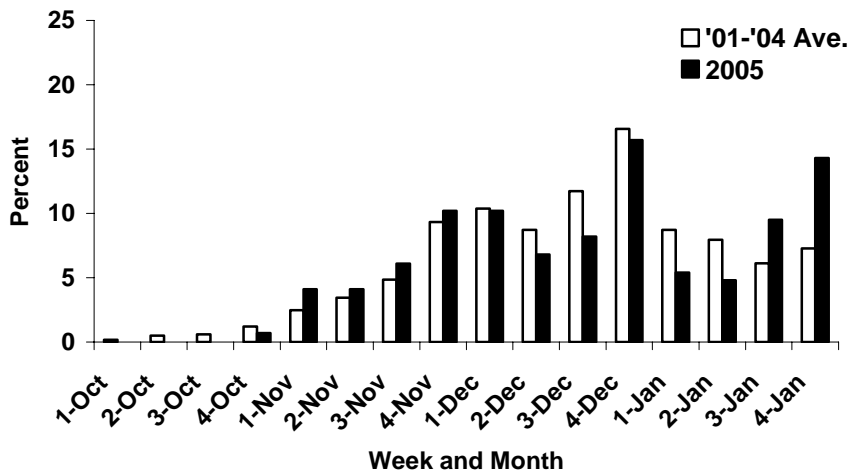


Figure 18. South Zone – Week preferred to hunt ducks, 2001-2004 average & 2005.



In 2005, 56% of North Zone hunters indicated their preferred week to hunt ducks was in November which was similar to 2004 (55%), 2003 (58%), 2002 (53%), and 2001 (56%), but lower than 2000 (66%). On average, North Zone hunters most preferred to hunt the 4th week in November. Middle Zone hunters preferred to hunt about a week later. South Zone hunters had the most disparate preferences with 25% of them preferred to hunt in November, 51% in December, and 34% in January.

In response to hunter opinions, Missouri opened the North and Middle Zone duck seasons about a week later in 2004. Hunters have responded favorably with only 21% of North Zone hunters, 20% of Middle Zone hunters, and 17% of South Zone hunters now indicating dissatisfaction with season dates (Figure 19). Only 12% of North Zone hunters, 14% of Middle Zone hunters, and 30% of South Zone hunters indicated that they still prefer to hunt in a week that falls either earlier or later

Figure 19. Satisfaction with season dates, 2002 - 2005.

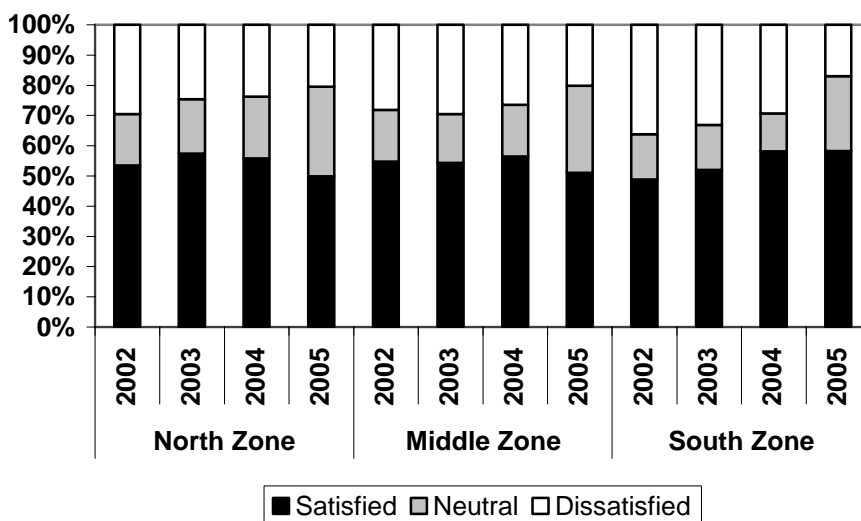
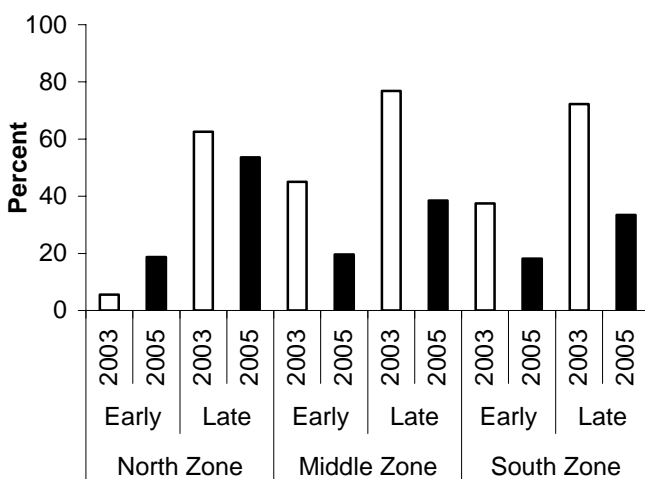


Figure 20. Percent of hunters dissatisfied with season dates by those with early & late season preferences, 2003 and 2005.



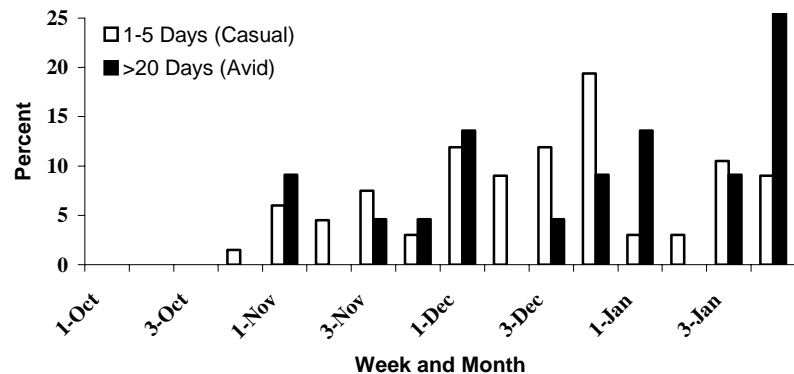
than provided by the most recent season structure.

For the first time, more hunters whose preference fell outside of the current season structure indicated they preferred to hunt earlier rather than later than the previous season's framework (57% vs. 43% late). In contrast, when the season was about a week earlier in 2003, only 27% of the hunters whose week preference was outside the previous year's framework wanted earlier opportunity, compared to 73% who wanted later opportunity. Hunters who prefer dates later than the previous year's structure continue to express more dissatisfaction with season dates than hunters who prefer earlier dates, but the gap is narrowing (Figure 20).

Avid versus Casual Hunters:

Avid hunters, the 13% who hunt more than 20 days per season, and casual hunters, the 45% who hunt less than 6 days per season, both must be considered when Missouri duck seasons are recommended. Their views, however, about preferred weeks to hunt are somewhat different. In the South Zone, for example, avid hunters preferred to hunt nearly two weeks later than casual hunters (Figure 21). The challenge is to provide seasons that encourage new and potentially future waterfowlers while maintaining involvement by experienced hunters.

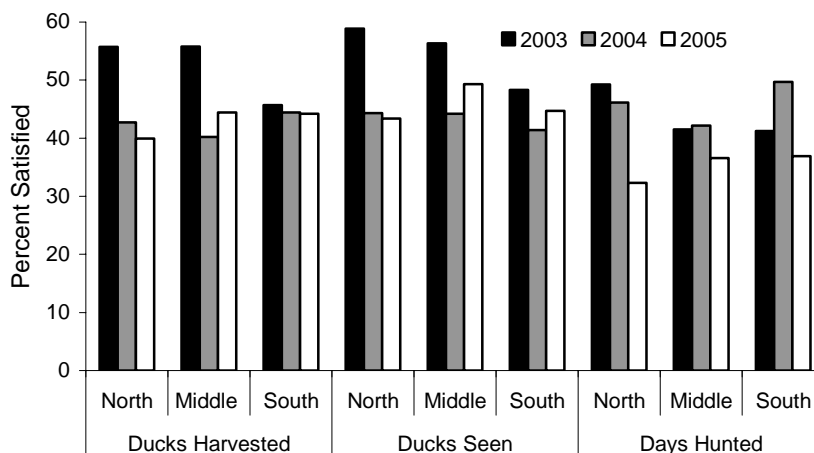
Figure 21. Week preferred to hunt by avid and casual South Zone hunters, 2005.



Measures of Hunter Satisfaction:

Each year we ask hunters how satisfied they were with the number of ducks they saw and harvested, as well as how satisfied they were with the number of days they hunted (Figure 22). These results generally indicate that hunter expectations are high. To illustrate, in 2003, a year with record harvest and a 60-day season, less than 60% of hunters indicated they were satisfied with the number of ducks they harvested or the number of ducks they observed. In 2004 and 2005, fewer than 50% expressed satisfaction in these areas even though statewide harvest and opportunity remained high. Hunters' satisfaction with the number of days they hunt is influenced by many personal and environmental factors other than season length. In 2006, ice conditions

Figure 22. Hunter satisfaction by zone, 2003-2005.



reduced hunting opportunity; and a consequence, only 32% of North Zone hunters indicated they were satisfied with the number of days they hunted compared to nearly 50% the previous two years.

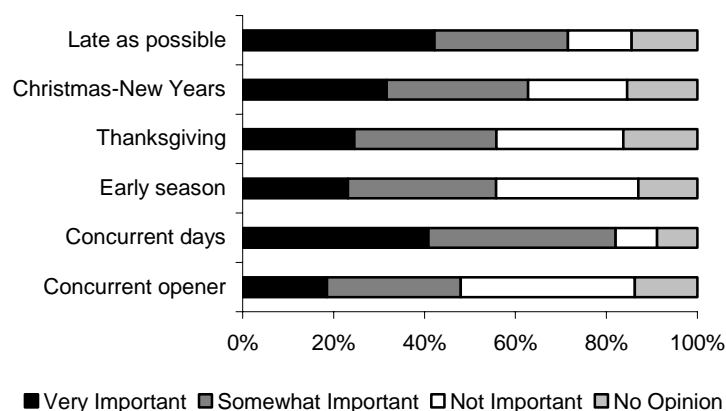
Canada Goose Season Considerations:

While hunter input plays an important role in determining duck hunting season dates, it plays a lesser role in regards to Canada geese. Population status of giant Canada geese and Eastern Prairie Population (EPP) Canada geese are the primary considerations. Giant Canada numbers are higher and more stable than EPP Canada geese and therefore can sustain greater harvests. Canada goose harvest management in the Mississippi Flyway is designed to maximize harvest opportunity for giant Canada geese without over-harvesting EPP Canada geese and other interior Canada goose populations.

Preferences among Canada goose hunters have changed dramatically since the 1980s. Growing numbers of giant Canada geese, delays in migration of the EPP, and a wider distribution of geese in Missouri have contributed to these changes. Traditionally, hunters indicated a desire for concurrent duck and goose openers (73% in 1988 and 63.2% in 1996), but this has become less important (48% in 2002). In 2002,

82% of goose hunters still favored having at least some concurrent duck and goose days. Goose hunters now desire late season opportunity (72% indicated it was important to have the goose season open as late as possible); however, 56% of goose hunters also indicated that it was important to have early season opportunity. We consider the timing of Thanksgiving weekend and Christmas/New Year's week and the need to control numbers of giant Canada geese (primarily through early seasons) as additional factors affecting goose season recommendations.

Figure 23. Goose hunter opinions of when goose seasons should be open.



North and Middle Zone Considerations:

The week hunters preferred to hunt Canada geese in the North Zone varies widely (13% prefer November, 42% December, and 41% January), reflecting preferences for early season giant Canada geese and late season migrants (Figure 24). When given the choice, 49% of North Zone goose hunters indicated they would rather have the late season segment open from 23 December, compared to 37% who would like it to open a week earlier.

In the Middle Zone, where fewer resident giant Canada geese are present, 52% of goose hunters indicated they prefer to hunt geese in January (Figure 25). Sixty percent of Middle Zone goose hunters also indicated that they would prefer the late season segment to open on December 23, and only 26% desired it to open on December 16.

South Zone and Southeast Zone Considerations:

Delayed migrations and few resident giant Canada geese contribute to late season hunting preferences among South Zone goose hunters (Figure 26). In 2005, 54% (vs. 57% 2001-2004 average) of South Zone goose hunters indicated that their preferred week to hunt was in January.

Figure 24. North Zone – Week most preferred to hunt Canada geese.

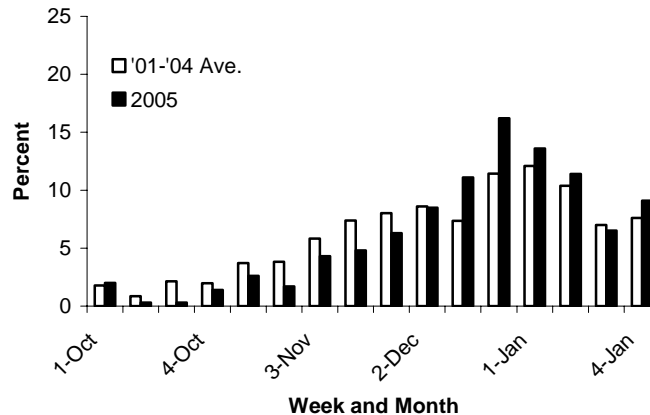


Figure 25. Middle Zone – Week most preferred to hunt Canada geese.

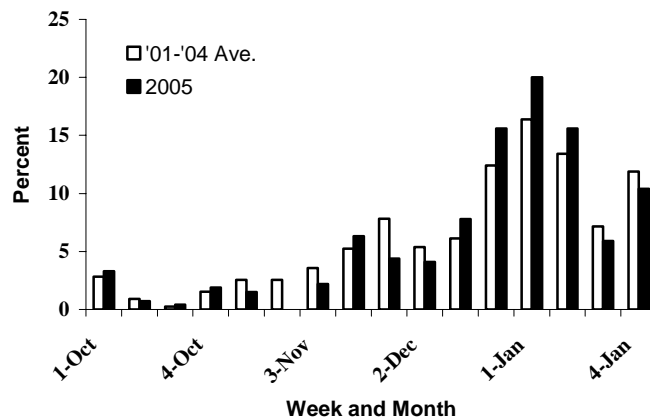
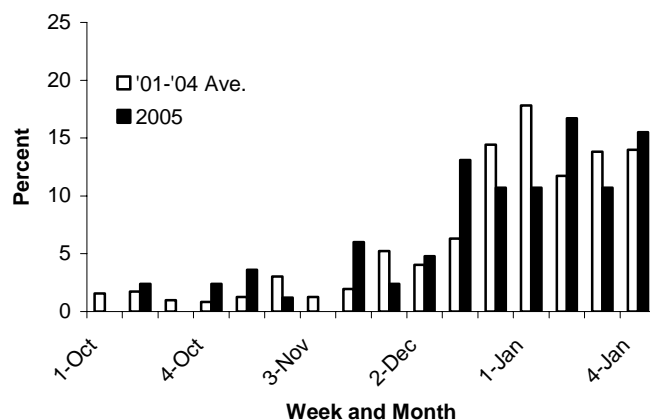


Figure 26. South & Southeast Zone – Week most preferred to hunt Canada geese.



Duck Zones and Split Seasons:

Missouri first implemented zones for duck seasons in 1977. By 1991, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offered standardized criteria for selecting zones and split seasons because of frequent requests for zone boundary changes in Missouri and other states. The criteria included the option to review season structure and zone boundaries every five years. The available choices allow for (1) a statewide season consisting of one, two, or three segments and no zones; (2) a split season in two zones; or (3) three zones with no split seasons. Missouri has opted for three zones and no splits since 1991, and will continue with this option from 2006-2010 with only slight modifications to zone boundaries.

The purpose of creating duck zones is to establish the best season dates for hunters within a large geographic region. To the degree possible, season dates are designed to accommodate different habitats, hunting styles, and species hunted within a given area. The reality of widely separated hunting locations (e.g. Southwest Missouri and the Bootheel) and diverse habitat types within the same zone make it difficult to provide optimum dates for any particular location. The result is that season dates are rarely ideal for hunters throughout a zone, but more often represent a compromise between regions within a zone. Primary considerations included in the zoning recommendation included:

- 1) Zone recommendations should apply to short as well as long seasons.** Zone boundaries cannot be changed during the next five years, even if Missouri is required to implement shorter seasons.
- 2) Both avid and novice duck hunters should be considered.** Because of the overwhelming interest by avid hunters and the predominant desire for mallard hunting, greater weight will continue to be placed on late season preferences. However, today's novice hunters may be an important part of future support for wetland and waterfowl conservation and should not be overlooked.
- 3) Simple zone boundary lines are the most desirable.** However, the diversity of habitat types, freeze-up timing, precipitation patterns, and associated hunter preferences have contributed to more complex zone boundaries in some locations.
- 4) Zone boundaries are not intended to extend the hunting season for those who travel.** Although this happens to some degree by establishing different season timing through zones or split seasons, zones are created to establish the best season for each region of Missouri.
- 5) Zones are established to benefit hunting on public and private land.** Department areas account for only about 15% of each year's hunting opportunity and harvest; thus, considering the location of zone boundaries relative to the distribution of public areas can be easily overemphasized from the standpoint of hunting opportunity.

Hunters Provide Input in Zone Boundary Review:

To assess hunter opinions about season structure and zone boundaries, the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) conducted a survey during 2004 of 10,000 randomly-selected migratory bird permit holders. Missouri Department of Conservation wetland managers and conservation

agents provided input about what they were hearing from hunters in their respective regions. We met with Ducks Unlimited members at their state convention and with the Missouri Waterfowl Association Board of Directors. MDC held nine workshops during March and April, 2006 to provide a forum for hunters to convey their preferences about Missouri's season structure for 2006-2010. We presented information about long-term migration, weather, and duck harvest, as well as the opinion survey results at these workshops. Participants completed individual surveys reflecting their preferences for season dates and zone boundaries. Additionally, small working groups (3-10 people) at the workshops developed recommendations.

Results of Zone Boundary Review:

North/Middle Zone Boundary Changed from Highway 50 to I-70. North Zone hunters in Central Missouri have season date preferences that are better matched with the Middle Zone. Just over 50% of statewide survey respondents and 75% of workshop participants who hunted in the North Zone in Central Missouri preferred the season to open at least one week later. This desire for later seasons appears to have increased over the last five years and will likely continue to increase if duck use patterns along the Missouri River and Grand Pass remain similar to the last five years. This change will accommodate hunters' desires for a straight, well-defined boundary. It will benefit Missouri River hunters between Jefferson City and Columbia, and in mild years will provide shallow water hunters with late season mallard hunting opportunity.

North/Middle Zone Boundary Remains Unchanged in St. Charles County. The North Zone was modified in 2001 to include St. Charles County in the Middle Zone. Less than 25% of avid hunters, casual hunters, and workshop participants indicated they were dissatisfied with season dates and zone boundaries in St. Charles County, so the zone boundary remains unchanged for 2006-2010.

South Zone Boundary Remains Unchanged. In 2001, the South/Middle Zone boundary was moved to highway 54 in response to hunter input at the Carthage and Lamar zoning workshops. Consensus has not been achieved, however, and hunters who felt disenfranchised during the past 5 years would like to see earlier season dates, or a return to the boundary that was in place during 1991-2000. At Springfield and Lamar, only 30 and 41 percent of workshop participants, respectively, were satisfied with season dates. Unfortunately, season date preferences in Barton County and in Southwest Missouri are earlier than recent South Zone dates and later than Middle Zone dates.

The South/Middle Zone boundary in Southeast Missouri provides shallow water hunters in Southeast Missouri with earlier season dates to minimize the risk of freezing up during the season, while providing Bootheel hunters the opportunity to hunt late when habitat conditions usually are better along the Mississippi River and St. Francis River. Eleven out of 23 small groups at Dexter and Jackson recommended leaving the current zone boundary in place. The remaining groups expressed little consensus about preferred alternatives. In the statewide survey, 37% of Southeast Missouri hunters favored the current zone boundary and nearly equal percentages favored highway 60 (18%), highway 34 (19%), and highway 72 (24%). The motives for change are the most complex in the Southeast with many hunters citing reasons that are inconsistent with the intent of duck zones such as maximizing hunting opportunity in two zones, or reducing the amount of crowding at public areas. The challenge posed by changing this zone boundary is that it would result in a season two weeks later than most hunters prefer.

Moving the Middle Zone season dates a week later and shifting the zone boundary back to its previous location in Southwest Missouri would have accommodated hunters in Southeast Missouri and Southwest Missouri. However, it would result in a season later than preferred by most hunters in the Middle Zone. It would also result in the Middle Zone opening on the same day as the deer firearms season.

Additional information about the information used in the review of zone boundaries, as well as the results from the zone workshops can be viewed at the following website:

<http://www.mdc.mo.gov/hunt/wtrfowl/zones/index.htm>

